

## CRIME AND MEDIA REPORTING, ROCHESTER, NY, 1988

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a bias in the media reporting of crime either by crime type or location. This study documents the reporting of crime in the Rochester Metropolitan area for the year of 1988. The crimes reported in the Democrat and Chronicle in 1988 were recorded and compared with the actual crime rates for that year. Initially, the data suggested that crime types of a more serious nature and crimes that occur in the suburbs were more likely to be reported in the newspaper than less serious crimes and crimes which occurred in the city. However, careful analysis of the data showed that crime reporting was a function of the frequency of a crime, not the crime type or location. The less frequent a crime, the more likely it will be reported by the media. Therefore, there is a negative linear relationship between the frequency of a crime and the frequency of its reporting in the newspaper.

Our perceptions of our environment are highly influenced by the media. Newspapers, television, radio, and movies all have an impact on how we view our world. In urban areas, problems such as crime receive considerable media coverage. Because we are not able to witness every act of crime that occurs, we rely on news sources to provide us with accurate information on the crime scene. However, what if our major sources of information are inaccurate, or even biased? We should not underestimate the impact that the media can have on the general view of crime incidence in an area. The media have the power to make problems seem bigger than they actually are, and likewise, to ignore problems that should receive more attention. An example of this can be seen in an article by Mark Fishman (1981). Fishman documents how the media actually "caused" a crime wave. He finds that in 1976, the New York City media began increasing their reporting of crimes committed against the elderly. Although the rate of crime against elderly persons actually decreased by 2.5% that year, the increased coverage prompted much attention by senior citizens organizations, a state legislator, and the mayor, who even "declared war" on such crimes and began allocating more money and manpower to the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit.

The perception of crime in urban areas has many important consequences. Decisions are often made about which places are safe to live, work, and travel based on crime, or at least our perceptions of its incidence (Boyer and Savageau, 1985). In this study, the relationship between actual crime rates and what the media report is investigated. The crime rates of the city of Rochester, New York and its suburban surroundings are compared to what was reported in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle during 1988. There is evidence that there is, in fact, a discrepancy between what crimes occur and the crimes that the public is made aware of by its local newspaper.

### STUDY METHOD

The study is based on Monroe County, New York using crime statistics for the City of Rochester and its surrounding suburbs. Statistics on crime incidence were compiled from

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the 1989 Crime and Justice Annual Report published by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services. In this reference source, statistics are given for every policing agency that operates in Monroe County, including the Rochester Police Department. To find the crime statistics for the "suburban area," the City of Rochester data were simply subtracted from the County total. Crime incidence rates were calculated per 100,000 population. Thus we can compare actual crime rates in both the urban and suburban settings (Table 1).

In order to establish a basis for comparing the media coverage of crimes, all of the crimes reported in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle for the year of 1988 were documented. The nature of the crime, where it took place, and if available, the addresses of the criminal and victim were noted. These data were compared to the actual crime data. If a criminal was arrested for more than one crime each of his reported charges was counted. Any articles which covered an incident that did not happen during 1988 were omitted. Also, for the sake of simplification within this study, several minor crime categories were omitted from the data.

**ANALYSIS**

The first observation that can be made from the data is that the crimes reported in the newspaper are not a balanced representation of the crimes that actually occur. Serious and infrequent crimes such as murder and rape have a very high likelihood of being reported; 100 percent of the 1988 suburban murders were covered by the newspaper. Robbery, a more common crime, had 3.4 percent and 12.9 percent of its occurrences reported in the City and the Suburbs respectively. Very frequent crimes receive almost no media attention. The newspaper covered only .05 percent and .23 percent of the larcenies in the City and Suburbs respectively.

These percentages are useful in establishing that some crimes are more likely than others to be reported in the newspaper. However, they also seem to suggest, due to higher percentages in the suburban column, that crimes are more likely to be reported if they occur in the suburb than in the city. Is there, in fact, a suburban bias in the media reporting of crimes? To answer this, we will look at the number of crimes per 100,000 population (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that there are significantly, but not surprisingly, more crimes per 100,000 population in the city than in the suburbs. Perhaps, therefore, the newspaper's better coverage of suburban crime can be attributed to the fact that there are simply relatively fewer crimes there.

A regression analysis of the crimes occurring and the crimes reported shows a negative linear relationship of the form

$$\log y = a-b \log x \quad (1)$$

where x denotes the crime rate by type and setting in 1988 and y, the dependent variable, represents the per cent of crimes which were reported in the newspaper (Figure 1). This equation explained 80% of the variance in y.

The graph clearly shows that the general linear relationship between crime incidence and crime reporting holds for both city and suburban rates. Therefore, reporting is essentially a function of crime frequency, not location or type. There is one large negative residual in the linear model. Despite the infrequency of suburban arson, it receives relatively low newspaper coverage. It is easy to see that the specific circumstances of this type of crime

in suburban settings might lack sensational, violent or human interest elements.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has shown a difference between the crimes which occur and those which are reported by a local newspaper. Infrequent crimes receive media attention, while common crimes are rarely reported. Infrequency can be a function of both the type of crime and the location of the crime. More serious crimes are less common and therefore featured more frequently in the newspaper. Crimes which occur in the suburbs are simply less common than those which occur in the city and likewise are also featured relatively more frequently in the newspaper. There is no bias in reporting certain types of crimes; the process of choosing which crimes to report is essentially a reflection of their frequency. Similarly, there is no city or suburban bias in the reporting of crime.

The observed log-log relationship between frequency and reporting may even make it possible for us to predict how often a crime will be reported in the newspaper based only on the frequency of its occurrence. As concerned citizens, it is important for us to take into consideration the inability for the newspaper to report all of the crimes which occur. We should be aware that, although there is no intention to distort the type or location of reported crimes, the media do have to make some kind of selection. This selection process would be an interesting area of investigation in itself.

In future research lies the possibility of exploring city-size differentials and regional cultural factors as additional elements in the equation of crime incidence and its media mirror.

**TABLE 1. CRIME INCIDENCE AND REPORTING: CITY OF ROCHESTER AND SUBURBS, 1988.**

CRIME	ROCHESTER			SUBURBS		
	Number of Crimes	Number Reported	Percent Reported	Number of Crimes	Number Reported	Percent Reported
Murder	36	26	72.22	7	7	100.00
Rape	212	13	6.13	47	7	14.89
Assault	853	63	7.38	119	7	5.88
Robbery	960	33	3.44	147	19	12.92
Burglary	5424	13	0.24	2132	6	0.28
Larceny	15547	7	0.05	4012	9	0.23
Arson	340	7	2.06	18	1	5.56

SOURCES: Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, NY; Crime and Justice Annual Report, Division of Criminal Justice Services, New York State, 1989.

NEWS REPORTING AND CRIME INCIDENCE: A LINEAR REGRESSION MODEL

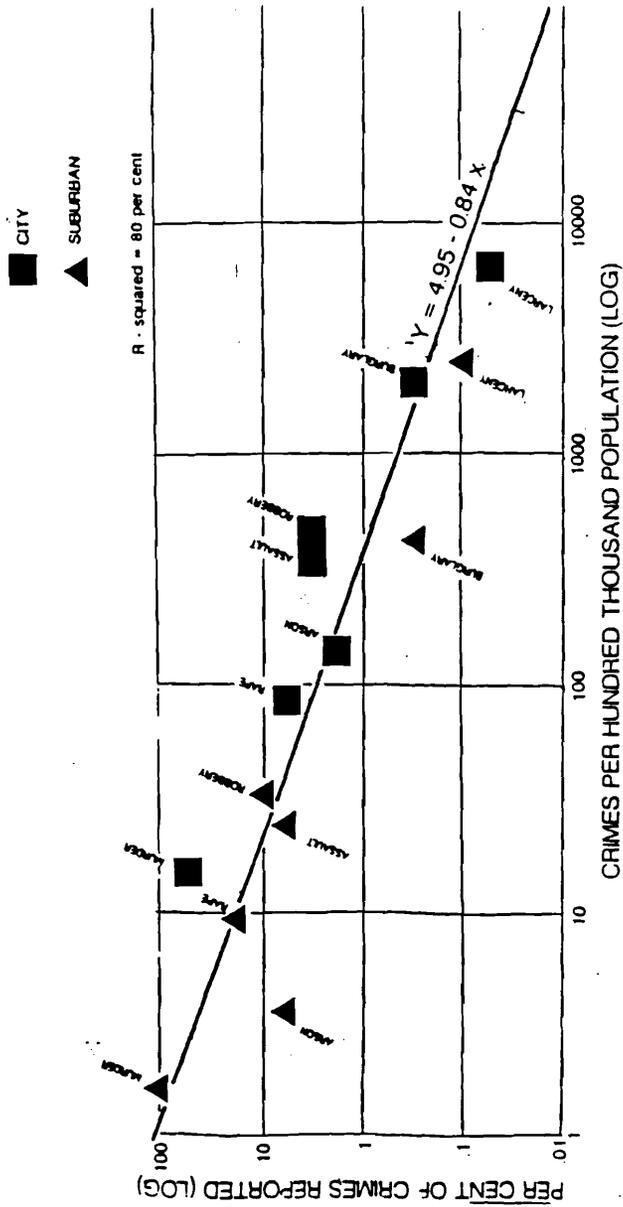


TABLE 2. CRIME PER 100,000 POPULATION:  
CITY OF ROCHESTER AND SUBURBS, 1988.

CRIME	ROCHESTER	SUBURBS
Murder	15.26	1.50
Rape	89.88	10.09
Assault	361.63	25.54
Robbery	406.99	31.54
Burglary	2299.50	457.49
Larceny	6591.15	2710.20
Arson	144.14	3.86

SOURCES: Crime and Justice Annual Report, Division of Criminal Justice Services, New York State, 1989.

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